

WHERE TO BELONG

World, destinations and the nature of true home

Part Two:

DESTINATION UNKNOWABLE

Literary representations of unreachable destinations and the true home in Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* and Hervé Guibert's *Paradise*

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ABSTRACT

Mid-way through Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* the narrator states 'I suspect that every man may be travelling towards the heart of some remote private plain'; a statement that illustrates a central motif in that particular work: the longed-for, personalised destination that is never reached. Similarly, Hervé Guibert's jaded traveller narrator in *Paradise* offers 'I look at photographs of Africa and I can see that Africa does not exist ... It is better to dream of Africa than set foot in it'. This exegesis will discuss the attributes and functions of 'unreachable destinations' in the aforementioned case studies, and will explore the notions of 'true homes' and belonging/not belonging as states of being responding to inauthentic landscapes. The reality of destinations (places) will be discussed with reference to the following: Jean Baudrillard's theories of simulacra and simulations and the replacing of meaning with signs and symbols; and Marc Augé's concept of 'non-places'. It will be argued that unreachable or non-existent destinations in the case studies function to turn the narrative journeys inward. Physical discovery or exploration becomes, instead, self-reflection; an attempt at unpacking a subjective reality in the hope of uncovering an authentic place, a true home.

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INTRODUCTION

You know that point in your life when you realise the house you grew up in isn't really your home anymore. All of a sudden even though you have some place where you put your shit – that idea of home is gone ... You feel homesick for a place that doesn't exist ... Maybe that is all family is: a group of people that miss the same imaginary place.

Largeman/Zach Braff – *Garden State*¹

Life and fiction are full of destinations: actual geographic locations both near and far; speculated locations perhaps deduced to be an accumulation of gases deep in space; and imagined locations, places of longing and desire – destinations with no reference to the corporeal. Many locations bind us to our existence with the reassurance that we can know and experience them, while others, those of speculation, provide us with a desire to go forward, to know more, to discover. With the desire for a destination comes the journey. With the desire for the journey come the possibilities of success and failure, the reaching of the destination or the failure to do so.

This exegesis will discuss the significance of unreachable destinations in modern fiction using the following case studies – Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* and Hervé Guibert's *Paradise*. In this research I define unreachable destinations as either actual existing locations that no longer function or resonate as authentic (for example, the alleged cabin in which Abraham Lincoln was born has been reconstructed numerous times in various positions or themed memorial sites using logs of unverified origins)² or imagined locations that are nonetheless considered to be real (for

¹ *Garden State*, motion picture, Writer/Director Zach Braff, Camelot Pictures and Large's Ark Production, USA, 2004.

² R Blythe, M Carroll, S Moffson, *Abraham Lincoln Birthplace: Historic Resource Study*, Cultural Resource Stewardship, Southeast Regional Office, National Park Service, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, 2001, p. 10 and pp. 52–54, viewed 14 February 2011, <http://www.nps.gov/abli/historyculture/upload/ABLI_Historic_Resource_Study.pdf>.

example, James Hilton's Shangri-la).³ This exegesis is mainly concerned with the various ideas of 'destination', and their respective states of unreachableness. I will argue that the unreachable destinations or the non-existence of the destinations that are accepted as existing or real in the case studies function to turn the narrative 'journey' inward. The narrative 'journey' turns from one of physical discovery into one of self-exploration. The characters of such journeys, faced with destinations that exist but are no longer authentic or are merely imaginary, turn instead to an exploration of their own existence and the meaning of their existence.

I will discuss this issue of the reality of 'destination' in relation to the case studies with reference to Jean Baudrillard's theories of simulation and simulacra: the replacing of reality and meaning with symbols and signs.

Baudrillard suggests three orders of simulacra⁴:

The first order, which Baudrillard associates with the period before the industrial revolution, denotes an object or image that is unequivocally standing in the stead of its real counterpart, for example a religious icon. A religious icon does not purport to be the deity it resembles.

The second order, which Baudrillard sees as ushered in by the industrial revolution, gives rise to a super saturation of stand-in objects or images through mass manufacturing and this proliferation of 'copies' of the original or real and their functioning as doppelgängers threatens the original's potency, for example a 'knock-off' Gucci handbag. A fake Gucci handbag, one of thousands, is intended to be mistaken for a genuine Gucci handbag. In the second order of simulacra it is still

³ Originating in Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, the fictional Shangri-la or a hidden earthly paradise no doubt has even earlier origins in Tibetan Buddhism. Depicted by Hilton as a utopia shut off from the rest of the world, Shangri-la quickly inspired speculation as to its *actual* whereabouts prompting expeditions and claims of its existence which persist even today. Most commonly Pakistan's Hunza Valley is claimed to be the inspiration for Shangri-la.

⁴ J Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Phillip Beitchman, Semiotext[e], MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, USA, 1983, p. 83.

possible, however, via careful critical examination to determine the authenticity or otherwise of an object.

The third order, aligned with the postmodern age and the ‘precession of simulacra’,⁵ exists when the simulacra or copies precede any original and the idea of reality erodes – the distinction between reality and representation begins to dissolve. With each subsequent order of simulacra ‘it becomes less and less possible to trace the origins of the simulations’⁶ and in the third and final order the trail from what simulates the real back to the real completely evaporates. Baudrillard offers several areas in which this precession of simulacra can be evidenced. Notably Disneyland, which, while an obvious second order simulacrum with its artificial ranges and castles, is also demonstrative of the third order. Disneyland, Baudrillard suggests, in its ultra realness is the unreal foil to the reality of the world beyond its walls. Disneyland makes the rest of the world appear more real in contrast. Disneyland is a land of make believe. We know that it is a fantasy and that the rest of the world that is not Disneyland must therefore be real. Baudrillard insists, however, that this is a ruse, that in truth it is this function that obscures the fact that the real has dissolved. That is, something cannot be considered real by virtue of the fact that some other thing is not real. It is only real in contrast to the blatantly unreal, which suggests it is not real at all. This third order of simulation is marked by a ‘reality’ produced by objects or information that do not reference anything in the real world but function as if they are real. For example, in the media where the manipulation via editing and the instantaneity of the image provides an end result far removed from the actuality that it

⁵ J Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, USA, 1994, p. 1.

⁶ J Topor, *Theories of Media, Keywords Glossary*, University of Chicago, 2002, viewed 9 April 2010, <<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/simulationsimulacrum2.htm>>.

claims to be. This is succinctly illustrated in Unilever's *evolution*⁷ advertisement for its Dove Campaign for Real Beauty which claims to celebrate the 'natural' appearance of woman. The advertisement features the sped up process of photographing a model, to extensive photo-editing of the raw image through to it being pasted as a large billboard for a fictional cosmetic company. The objective of the campaign was to promote 'natural beauty' by showing how in cosmetic advertising a model's face is altered via makeup and lighting before photographing and how the resulting images are also altered (enlarging eyes, plumping lips) through photo-editing techniques. The final image correlates to an actual person but is not a faithful image of an actual person. Perhaps Baudrillard's most famous examination of the third order of simulacra is *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*⁸ which contrary to what the title suggests argues that rather than a war taking place in the Gulf it was something else altogether. Baudrillard makes a number of claims regarding the Gulf War including that it was a situation that was depicted in the media, particularly the US televised media, in such an edited way that it bore little resemblance to the actual combat (as it was retold to Baudrillard by soldiers who were on the ground in Iraq) and that the coalition who engaged the Iraqis did so mostly from a distance, leading to fewer US casualties than would usual occur through natural attrition should the troops have stayed at home.

It is this erosion of reality, of the real, by a pre-emptive simulation that defines Baudrillard's view of the postmodern world. The real, Baudrillard states, is a concept and 'as such implies an origin, an end, a past and a future, a chain of causes and

⁷ *evolution*, web and television advertisement, Unilever International, 2006, viewed 5 July 2010, <www.unilever.com/brands/ouradvertising/dove/Dove_evolution.aspx>.

⁸ J Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, USA, 1995.

effects, a continuity and a rationality'.⁹ It is this reality that is challenged by the presence of simulation, by the proliferation of 'phantom content'¹⁰ or phantom reality. As Dino Felluga notes 'Baudrillard is not merely suggesting that postmodern culture is artificial, because the concept of artificiality still requires some sense of reality against which to recognize the artifice. His point, rather, is that we have lost all ability to make sense of the distinction between nature and artifice'.¹¹

In introducing his chapter 'The Precession of Simulacra' Baudrillard invokes in 'On Exactitude in Science' the single paragraph fable of the mapmakers of an empire written by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares. The cartographers make a map so detailed and large that it covers the whole empire. Later generations, however, less enamoured by maps of such scale, let the map decay in the elements so that only vestiges of it remain in a peripheral wilderness where it serves as home for outcasts and animals.¹² Baudrillard turns this analogy around so it is the 'map that precedes the territory' and the empire or the 'real' that is in ruination.¹³ The inhabitants of the empire populate a simulation of false locations and it is reality that is in tatters in the wastelands. Indeed this falls into Baudrillard's 'third order of simulations', a state where there is only the simulacrum. Beyond the simulacrum there is nothing. The inhabitants of the empire like the acolytes of Disney cling to the 'hyperreality'¹⁴ of the map, for the real world can no longer be discerned.

⁹ J Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, ed. Julia Witwer, Columbia University Press, New York, USA, 2000, p. 63.

¹⁰ J Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 80.

¹¹ D Felluga, 'Modules on Baudrillard: On Simulation' *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, Purdue University, November 28 2003, viewed 28 February 2009, <www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/postmodernism/modules/ baudrillardsimulation.html>.

¹² J L Borges and A B Casares, 'On Exactitude in Science', in J L Borges, *Jorge Luis Borges, Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley, Penguin, New York, USA, 1999, p. 325.

¹³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1.

¹⁴ A state where it is no longer possible to distinguish what is real from what is not real.

Beyond the map there is no longer any real geography, no destinations to reach. The destination object in the classical and perhaps mythological sense no longer exists or cannot be located. Real destinations are exhausted. In exploring the locations of the world we have transformed them into signs and the world into a map. Baudrillard gives the example of how in ethnology ‘objects’, or some essential element represented by an object, begin to evanesce at the exact moment that they are being grasped or discovered.¹⁵ He cites how the Philippine Tasaday¹⁶ Indians ‘discovered’ in 1971 were returned to the jungles and cordoned off from the outside world in order to preserve their ethnological import and the French Lascaux caves protected from onslaught by the construction of a traversable replica guard against this loss of primary scientific material.¹⁷ However, such a process erodes the authenticity of what it sets out to protect. Replica caves are not by definition real, they simulate the real, are a sign of what was once real.

So too with geographic locations and destinations. The nineteenth century notion of ‘lands untouched by human hands’ has become meaningless. In Baudrillard’s terms we have only the map, which while once representing the real

¹⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 7.

¹⁶ The veracity of the Tasaday as a previously uncontacted stoneage tribe has been tested since the first publication of *Simulacra and Simulation* in 1985. The full story is far more convoluted. The website <www.museumofhoaxes.com> sums it up thus: ‘The Tasaday weren’t a true stone-age tribe. But nor were they farmers coerced into playing a stone-age tribe. Instead, they were very poor people living close to Nature in the Philippine jungle who became swept up in and manipulated by global events beyond their control. This version of events isn’t as compelling as the versions that made headlines in 1971 and 1986, but it is a good illustration of how the truth is often far messier and more complicated than it appears at first glance’. (Viewed 8 October 2009.) Nonetheless, Baudrillard would have found the story of a jungle tribe encouraged to appear more primitive by a Marcos advisor with ulterior motives equally as compelling in support of his ideas of simulations and simulacra – the ‘authentic’ stoneage tribe found and catalogued, quarantined, then rediscovered, recatalogued as a hoax etc. Real or hoax the Tasaday are commodity, exhibits to be consumed.

¹⁷ Ironically the effort to protect the paintings via quarantine and air-conditioning led to an infestation of fungus that permanently stained some of the pigments.

curves of the Earth is now the only landscape in that it ‘masks the absence of a profound reality’.¹⁸

In applying Baudrillard’s theories of simulation and simulacra to notions of ‘journey’ and ‘destination’ there are immediate points of reference. The world is full of destinations, known locales that form part of Baudrillard’s map and as such are mere placeholders that tread water where once an authentic location or site existed. We experience these places as real but something fundamental to their status as real is missing. Baudrillard notes in the chapter ‘Simulacra and Science Fiction’¹⁹ that ‘the imaginary *was* the alibi of the real’²⁰ [my italics]; that is, by alibi he means the evidence that proves reality is elsewhere. Reality is not the fantasy of science fiction; it is the world in which science fiction is created. Journeys to unknown destinations in science fiction narratives served as bolstering opposites to the comforting and accepted state of the known reality. The ‘imaginary’²¹ of classical science fiction (work that primarily dealt with the exploration of space) that mined the territory of otherness did so at the same time as real ‘exploration and colonization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’²² was taking place. But such exploration is now largely exhausted. Actual imaginary reserves or as Baudrillard puts it ‘virgin territory’²³ no longer exist. Instead our terrestrial locations have become what could be termed as ultra destinations or ultra paradises in that they represent the imaginary

¹⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, pp. 121–127.

²⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 122.

²¹ ‘Imaginary’ here is foremost simply defined as lacking in factual reality but also includes the noun usage of sociology, derived from Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical ‘imaginary’, meaning the commonly held values of a social group.

²² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 123.

²³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 123.

that they once were. Witness the Gaza plateau and its countless so-called ‘authentic’ trinkets forced upon intrepid explorers as century-old antiquities.²⁴

Baudrillard goes so far as to suggest that just as the imaginary once proved that the real or reality was elsewhere, the real is now our ‘true utopia’,²⁵ which is to say it functions as once the imaginary did. We long for it as a counter to the perceived lack of authenticity in the overexposed geography and space of the world.

In Gerald Murnane’s *The Plains*, the entire narrative takes place in, and is concerned with finding a definition of, the mythical inland Australian location and destination of the plains. Against this immersion in the very title and topic of the novel the plains themselves remain uncharted and unknown, their ‘truth’ ungraspable. In this sense Murnane uses the perception and representation of Australian geography to explore the postmodern issue of the nature of reality. More precisely, Murnane is primarily concerned with retaining and preserving the imaginary as proof of the existence of reality elsewhere. Murnane’s plains are not to be grasped or known, but rather observed and wondered about. The pleasure of knowing is deliberately and forever deferred. As Murnane states ‘It’s all to do I guess with the notion of possibility and deferred pleasure, postponement of discovery, wanting to leave the best until last. Partly childish things but in my case they’ve lasted through into adulthood and even into my writing’.²⁶ Rather than extend their knowledge of the known lands or plains through unchallenged and definitive study (such as a map), the people of the plains favour a subjective understanding of their surroundings.

Murnane’s argument seems to be that a shared view of reality is only a mere

²⁴ Similarly, the Chinese city of Shenzhen offers every kind of replica or fake designer attire while the nearby village of Dafen can provide any number of Van Goghs and Da Vincis complete with forged signatures.

²⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 123.

²⁶ G Murnane, quoted from an interview with Peter Mares on ABC Radio National The Book Show, 12 October 2009.

representation of reality – ‘the only merit of so-called real lands ... was that people of dulled sensibility could find their way about in them by agreeing to perceive no more than did others of their kind’ (p. 87). The manner in which reality is represented in *The Plains* relates to Baudrillard’s theories in the use of the imaginary and unreachable as proof of the existence of reality elsewhere and yet such a reality is unverifiable as it is completely subjective – it only references reality via a single perception. As Salusinszky puts it, it ‘is not a given reality, but one that is being constructed and deconstructed in the imagination’.²⁷ Rather than the imaginary of the unreachable and unknowable plains solidifying a shared reality, the manifold realities they inspire in the imaginations and research of the people of the plains fragment reality and drive the narrative toward interiority.

In contrast the frenetic, chaotic holidaying of Hervé Guibert’s *Paradise* in the burnt out exoticism of, among other places, the French Pacific and Africa is a litany of grasped disappointments or as Paul Virilio puts it a ‘frittering away [of] the appearance of the real world in a series of temporary sets’.²⁸ Here destinations resemble Baudrillard’s map in that they are mere cut-outs, false properties that seem to have dismantled the real world. The tourist is pre-supposed by the destination and the destination in turn is pre-supposed by the tourist. Neither exists in a meaningful way and it is the movement only, across once tyrannous distances, which becomes the destination of choice. The only surety is speed.

It is perhaps useful at this point to briefly summarise both case study novels.

²⁷ I Salusinszky, *Gerald Murnane*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, Australia, 1993, p. 46.

²⁸ P Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, trans. Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, USA, 1995, p. 87. In this work on how the motor changed the world, Virilio uses the story of how Grigory Potemkin allegedly had model villages constructed along the banks of the Dnieper River to fool Empress Catherine II of Russia into a false sense of the extent and prosperity of her empire. Hence, the term ‘sets’.

Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* is a first-person past-tense narrative which tells the story of a filmmaker who travels into inland Australia to find work with one of the large landowner families of the plains. In the first part (which makes up about half of the book) he arrives in a town on the periphery of the plains and takes part in, along with other prospective artisans/writers/scientist et al., a process of presenting himself and his skills to the gathered landowners in hope of securing a patronage. Once he gains employment with a landowner he leaves for the landowner's estate and commences the process of making a film which will capture the elusive and illusive plains – a particular version of the plains as seen by him but also by his landowner patron. The patron has a daughter the filmmaker hopes to include in his film and with whom he has a fascination. Much of the narrative in this first part concerns the plains themselves, the culture and history of the plains, the complex relationship that exists between the plains and the people who occupy them and the many ways sought to define the plains.

The second part takes place ten years after the filmmaker arrived at his landowner's estate. We learn that the filmmaker is still working on his film/script, and of the many anxieties related to capturing the plains in a filmic manner.

The third and final part describes the filmmaker being summoned to one of his landowner patron's 'scenes', a sort of picnic/expedition out on the plains at which his patron arranges his guest in tableaux for photographing. The filmmaker reflects here on his failure at producing a film and what success, if any, he has had at coming close to portraying some essential element of the plains. The difficulty the narrator has is that in representing the plains it must be accepted that they are 'paradoxically apart from, yet defining further' (p. 168) all other plains. As the subjective is privileged it

can never be externally verified that he has succeeded. All understandings of the plains are valuable; all realities are real, if only internally.

Hervé Guibert's *Paradise* is a first-person multiple-tense narrative detailing the travels of the narrator (an unpublished writer) and his 'fiancée' Jayne through Martinique, Tahiti, Bora Bora, Africa, Washington and Zurich. It begins with Jayne's disembowelling death on a coral reel off the Salines in Martinique. The narrator is at first suspected of being somehow involved in Jayne's death and is detained by the local police until eventually they declare that they cannot identify her by her name Jayne Heinz and therefore conclude that she does not exist. The narrator is no longer suspected, does not attend Jayne's funeral, and goes about trying to establish what he knows about his dead lover – retracing their travels to that point.

While the novel opens in Martinique, the actual chronological course of the narrator's travels is Africa, Zurich, Washington, Zurich, Bora Bora and Martinique. The narrative switches between the past and present (Martinique) so Jayne is sometimes alive and at other times dead. Likewise in Martinique we learn that the narrator's father died in a traffic accident some time in the past but later in tracing his travels through Africa and returning to Zurich he is of course still alive. During the narrative the narrator's Aunt Suzanne also dies.

In Africa the pair travel through Mali, Bamako and Seguo. They both contract chlamydia which they pass back and forth between them and never seem to shake. They return to Zurich and learn that Suzanne has died. The narrator collapses in front of a church, is hospitalised and then goes to Washington for a specialised brain scan. They return to Zurich and then depart again, this time for Bora Bora before Martinique where Jayne's death occurs.

There is scope within the discussion of unreachable destinations in the narratives of the case studies to examine briefly the idea of a 'true home'. As I will argue that a destination's state of unreachableness promotes a more interior narrative I will also argue the possibility that such interior narratives are searches for a true home. A true home may be the ultimate unreachable destination – a location that is ever yearned for but never arrived at.

The idea of a true home is a persistent one in literature – whether it be the idea that the soul's true resting place is with a deity in a heaven as described in the Judeo-Christian faiths, an ascent from the shadowy existence on earth to an illuminated position as described in the Platonic allegory of the cave or something more idiosyncratic. A more terrestrial application for the term can, for instance, be found in discussions/fictions depicting exile. Edward Said notes that exile '... is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and its native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted'.²⁹

Guibert's narrator in *Paradise* speaks of a 'move toward god' (p. 106), one that is declined in favour of Africa and more precisely 'what I went to Africa to find: eternity. The indivisible seam between life and death ...' (p. 106). So while there is the acknowledgement of the idea that the true home is at the side of god, ultimately it is rejected. The idea of god seems unsatisfactory as a final destination or place. Toward the end of *Paradise*, in Martinique, in the context of hallucinating, the narrator again mentions god, noting 'I thought I'd met God, or the devil, but it was neither one nor the other' (p. 118). This statement is immediately followed by more mundane, yet somehow more significant, observations such as 'On the beach I put on again my camel leather sandals, so gentle to the feet' and 'Life is sweet at Rosette's. I

²⁹ E Said, 'The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile', *Harper's Magazine*, September 1984, pp. 49–55, viewed 22 July 2009, <www.harpers.org/archive/1984/09/0025420>.

could end my days here' (p. 118), as if the small everyday details of the narrator's existence are more important than the possibility of deities and the question of one's soul. Later in the same passage the narrator relates that his landlady Rosette says 'the typhoon can carry the whole hotel way, nothing left at all, it all has to be rebuilt' (p. 119), a sentiment that seems to echo the narrator's desire to simply burn out rather than be ushered out by ceremony.

Similarly, Murnane has little interest in heaven as the location of his narrator's true home in *The Plains*. Karin Hansson notes in her paper 'Gerald Murnane's Changing Geographies',³⁰ the phrase 'true home' occurs in two of Gerald Murnane's works (*Tamarisk Row* and *Landscape With Landscape*) but it permeates all his work including *The Plains*. So much so that Imre Salusinszky notes 'Murnane has pursued the theme that obsesses him the most: the theme of exile'.³¹ Like Guibert's narrator's 'indivisible seam' Murnane's narrator of *The Plains* speaks of an interstitial plain, 'an ill-defined zone between the last places that he could wish for and the first of those that he has no claim to ... a plain that by definition cannot be visited ...' (p. 116). Murnane's narrator uses the analogy of a man who when considering his youth searches for its particularity and when considering his present seeks the identity of his place within it – and the apparent failure of either the young or the older man to do so. They are each, the narrator concludes, making maps of their adjoining territories, only to find that when their respective maps come together there is a gap between them that cannot be accounted for. It is this space, this 'particularity', that the narrator must

³⁰ K Hansson, 'Murnane's Changing Geographies', research paper, University of Karlskrona/Ronneby, Karlskrona, Sweden, p. 1, 2000, presented at the international conference on 'Changing Geographies: Australia and the Millennium', University of Barcelona, 2–4 February 2000, Blekinge Institute of Technology, viewed 5 June 2008, <[www.bth.se/fou/forskinfor/nsf/0/b43768cafc3cf341c12568a3002cac28/\\$FILE/Research%20Report%2003-00.pdf](http://www.bth.se/fou/forskinfor/nsf/0/b43768cafc3cf341c12568a3002cac28/$FILE/Research%20Report%2003-00.pdf)>.

Hansson cites the phrase occurring in *Tamarisk Row* and *Landscape With Landscape*.

³¹ Salusinszky, p. 3.

be reconciled with, this private interzone that is perhaps analogous to god or a true home.

Guibert's 'indivisible seam' and Murnane's 'interstitial plain' allude to the true home as it is depicted in modern fiction. Both novels eschew religious accounts of this 'essential sadness' or longing, and instead set out to express how such a longing is experienced and expressed in the absence of suspended disbelief in the afterlife.

Finally I will discuss my own creative project, a novel, *The Fourth Place*, in relation to the themes of this exegesis. My novel, a third-person, past-tense episodic narrative with some postmodernist and modernist overtones is ostensibly the story of two men, Mark and Abelard, who find themselves lost in a empty town in the middle of the Australian desert with no way of leaving and indeed it is unclear if either of them ever do leave the town. Interspersed with their story are the stories of other characters they are together or individually connected to and stories related to their pasts.

Through the character-driven episodes that make up the work, connections are made between the individuals but are not necessarily played out. Crossed paths are alluded to but actual connection is perhaps something that occurred in the past, or at the very least off-the-page. It is a narrative of deliberate introspection populated by poor personal historians who draw no unwavering conclusions about themselves or the nature of the world they inhabit.

Chapter I – UNREACHABLE DESTINATIONS

Fiona had never learned Icelandic and she had never shown much respect for the stories that it preserved—the stories that Grant had taught and written about. She referred to their heroes as “old Njal” or “old Snorri.” But in the last few years she had developed an interest in the country itself and looked at travel guides. She read about William Morris’s trip, and Auden’s. She didn’t really plan to travel there. She said there ought to be one place you thought about and knew about and maybe longed for but never did get to see.

Alice Munro³²

Joseph Campbell concludes *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* with a précis of the state of modern humankind in terms of its myths and its relationship to this mythology—quoting Nietzsche’s Zarathustra ‘Dead are all the Gods’, Campbell states that today ‘One does not know toward what one moves. One does not know by what one is propelled’.³³ And while Campbell conjures Nietzsche’s words that shaped modern and postmodern thought, Baudrillard too invokes them in his Wellek Library Lecture on ‘The Murder of the Real’: ‘the Real is not just dead (as God is) it has purely and simply disappeared’.³⁴ I intend to argue and illustrate that in the narratives of *The Plains* and *Paradise* there is nothing real to move toward – no real destinations – and a lack of meaning from which to set out from giving priority to defining the individual and the individual position. Locations as real locations, denied to the

³² A Munro, ‘The bear came over the mountain’, *New Yorker* magazine, Condé Nast Digital, December 1999, viewed 15 March 2009,

<www.newyorker.com/archive/1999/12/27/1999_12_27_110_TNY_LIBRY_000019900>.

³³ J Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Fontana Press, London, 1993, p. 388.

This, Campbell states in 1949, is due to all meaning for humankind now residing in the individual and not the group (and the cohesion of myths) and furthermore residing within the individual’s unconscious thus enacting a ‘split’ in the human psyche. Compare with E Fromm, *Anatomy Of Human Destructiveness*, Owl Books, Henry Holt Company, New York, USA, 1992, p. 261–262.

³⁴ Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, pp. 61–62.

narrators of both these novels due to geographic constraints or cultural depletion, refocus the narratives on an interior exploration of the human condition.

In *The Plains* an unattainable utopian plain at the ever-receding horizon is the imaginary counterpoint to the plains in which the narrative takes place; in *Paradise* all of the more familiar (to us) locations of the narrator's travels are one after the other beyond comprehensions as real sites.

Real destinations evaporate on one's arrival or have pre-evaporated in both Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* and Hervé Guibert's *Paradise*. *The Plains*' obsession with a terra incognita that is always just out of reach condenses destinations in an ever-receding distance while *Paradise*'s only real destination would appear to be a bubble that encloses the narrator; such is the lividity of the geographic sites visited. Both narratives have an atmosphere of the 'dead end', a point where pathways and possibilities, even time, turn in on themselves. Paul Virilio uses the German term *Langweile* to mean 'the repeated sensation that time is standing still'³⁵ and suggests that the acceleration of the motor age to some degree countered such ennui. He warns, however, that such speed eventually exhausts time and with it space. 'It seems this might explain why the choice destinations of this last civilisation, from the nineteenth century on, have been places *at the end of the line ...*'³⁶ Baudrillard includes in his map analogy the observation that it 'it is the real ... whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts',³⁷ and both narratives of the case studies seem to pursue these marginalised places – desert islands, mythical plains – in search of the real and meaningful.

³⁵ Virilio, p. 88.

³⁶ Virilio, p. 88.

³⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1.

Both Murnane and Guibert are preoccupied with this perhaps ultimately futile search for authenticity, precisely for a profound reality, at remote points. *The Plains*’ ‘elaborate meaning behind appearances’ (p. 1) in that ‘land we all dream of exploring’ (p. 66) and *Paradise*’s Africa that ‘does not exist’ (p. 119), however, offer only reflexivity, rather than something real beyond the signs and symbols of an imaginary landscape, the sense that there is nothing to see except ourselves. There is evidence in both books of this interiority and a turning inward. Early in *The Plains* the narrator observes of a group of men of the plains – ‘I had a bewildering sense that they wanted no common belief to fall back on ... It was as though each plainsman chose to appear as a solitary inhabitant of a region that only he could explain’ (p. 8). Imre Salusinszky succinctly illustrates (and Hansson also quotes) *The Plains* is ‘all about finding a “native district” in which one can finally “see properly”’.³⁸ Salusinszky discusses *The Plains* in terms of a phenomenology, that is, an ‘active constitution of our own conscious world’.³⁹ The ‘native district’ is not a physical place and seeing properly requires neither rods nor cones. It is this subjectivity that is scrutinised, in *The Plains*, the ‘what’s inside us’, to the point where there are references to the light of day (what is illuminated and known) disappearing through the eyes of plainsmen into a profound darkness. This gives the impression that the nature of what lies inside of all of us is dark, foreboding and unknowable and the only worthy site for exploration. Similarly, the failed writer/narrator of *Paradise*, in describing himself, evokes Thomas Bernhard’s *The Chalk Pit*⁴⁰ and its writer character who never tilted ‘his head over the

³⁸ Salusinszky, p. 43.

Salusinszky is quoted here quoting an unpublished lecture delivered by Murnane at La Trobe University in 1988.

³⁹ Salusinszky, p. 44.

⁴⁰ While the reference here is clearly to Bernhard’s *The Lime Works*, the translated title of *Das Kalkwerk*, it is unclear whether the title *The Chalk Pit* is an oversight in James Kirkup’s translation of *Paradise* or a deliberate distortion of the truth by Guibert who was known to at times mix fact with fiction.

desk, as one dives into a black pool whose bottom is invisible' (p. 46). The point being made that the worth of a writer is only measured in how far they delve into their own psyche. (Guibert, however, was quite prolific even when terribly ill, so in a sense he never shied away from externalising his interior through his writing.) So when there is nowhere left to find, nowhere to arrive at – do we finally arrive at ourselves?

Within the boundaries of such terrain, a non-existent Africa and dreamed of plains, a landscape that is always turning a blind eye to the lack of authenticity, a place where space is exhausted by overexposure and proliferation – the unreachable becomes privileged. Actual geographic locations no longer represent an authentic experience, but the possibility of such authentic places is still necessary. The imagined, the beyond reach, still functions as the desired object. And it is one that individuals must define for themselves for no two imaginings are alike. The unreachable destination is defined by the individual and comes to resemble the individual in that it is a site upon which individuals can project and measure themselves. In *Paradise* the narrator declares 'I can no longer bring myself to believe that I went to Africa ... It has all faded away' (p. 107), indeed all of the narrator's travels are cast under some doubt due to his amnesia and the apparent non-existence of his dead fiancée. Such elements serve to undermine the significance and accessibility of 'destinations' in preference to the narrator and his thoughts – 'I remember my books, that's the one thing I can remember clearly' (p. 98). In *The Plains*, the narrator is more direct in how the illusive nature of the plains reflects the projected interiority of the individuals who dwell there – 'somewhere out among the swaying grasses of their estates ... they had learned the true stories of their lives and known the men they might have been' (p. 58).

The Plains

To examine *The Plains* first, Murnane's inland Australian plains shimmer on the horizon as 'land beyond the known land' (p. 69), rich with the embellishments of cultural and historical scrutiny and yet such land is largely unknown, or out of reach to those who dwell there. In his exploration of these plains, Murnane offers, a 'man who travels begins to fear that he may not find a fitting end to his journey' (p. 75).

The inhabitants of the plains, proud and committed to their surroundings (the lands) and their way of life nonetheless seem to be resigned to a perpetual yearning, a recognition of an unattained position or satisfaction unachieved. Much of the narrative is concerned with the cultural/historical/curatorial activities of the plainsfolk. The narrator, the filmmaker, is the guide into this world of itinerant arts workers who seek out the plains and the rich landowners who desire their expertise to realise dreams for parochial cultural collections. The scope of the activities described brings to mind the activities of obsessive compulsives – arranging around a grand house of the plains numerous fish tanks each stocked with fish of particular colours to reflect the importance in the history of the family of these colours (p. 52); years spent in consultation to design a family emblem only then to mask most of it from public display to protect its originality (a practice known as veiling – p. 53 – much like the Tasaday were protected from the world) and the comparison of accounts of identical 'scenes' by the same solitary observer, one set of observations being unschooled, the other taken after the observer 'had acquired the skill to attempt a fitting description of them' (p. 108). The narrator explains that the accounts in this last example are very popular reading among the plainsfolk who like to apply such theories to their own lives in the full knowledge that they are wholly subjective and have no relevance

outside their creator. All of these pursuits transform the real lands and all that they hold, in ever more oblique and esoteric ways, into information, data that is rarefied, controversial and often meaningless and shape an ‘other’ landscape – the *true plains* perhaps, giving a shadow of form to what can never be reached. In effect the people of the plains, obsessed as they are with finding and naming the perfect terrain, the ultimate plain, have turned their gaze inward and between, to the task of revealing the minutiae of the known – a process which gives rise to the possibility of somewhere else to discover, a private place that is particular to each individual of the plains.

Indeed Salusinszky discusses *The Plains* under the chapter heading ‘A Private Place Marked off from all Others’ noting that places and people in the narrative are all unnamed ‘adding to the stories unsettling interiority’.⁴¹ Adding weight to this interiority is the belief in an ‘interstitial plain’ (p. 116), a zone that cannot be entered but borders and provides access to all other plains. Murnane’s characters on the plains, particularly the plainsmen of whom the narrator often speaks, are encircled on many levels. As mentioned previously they wish to appear separate in culture and traditions from all others, they strive to inhabit ‘a zone of mystery, enclosed by the known and the all-too-accessible’ in their affairs and even in a physical sense they dwell in vast estates ‘marooned on their great grassy islands impossibly far from the mainland’ (p. 41).

In *The Plains* the generation of information and the extrapolation of possible applications of that information, place the inhabitants of the plains in an ever tightening spiral of ‘gradual and inevitable cycles’ (p. 112) – the more they investigate and illustrate their understanding of the known land the more real and desirable their own particular unknown and unknowable lands or ‘ultimate plains’

⁴¹ Salusinszky, p. 41.

(p. 92) become. It is as if the accumulation of data gives rise to, makes plausible or simply more real, the prospect of a truer place. The inventory of the known lands, however, is unending and the truer place is never more than an unreachable mirage.

It is a fitting allegory for the modern world which Baudrillard interprets as one of ‘more and more information, and less and less meaning’⁴² His chosen hypothesis being ‘information is directly destructive of meaning’⁴³ by producing content that is devoid of meaning, that plays at being content, for example participatory and reality programs, communication that asserts everyone and everything is an event. Indeed Baudrillard insists that it is precisely a proliferation that endangers the survival of any given thing – ‘if the Real is disappearing, it is not because of a lack of it—on the contrary, there is too much of it. It is the excess of reality that puts an end to reality’.⁴⁴ The all consuming effort of the man of *The Plains* in accumulating an abundance of information about his *place* demonstrates this erosion of the desired object and highlights a growing deficiency and a need ‘to explore whatever was beyond the illusions that could be signified by simple shapes and motifs’ (p. 49) as ‘no end was yet in sight to the regions he knew in his heart’ (p. 50). The conundrum of the plainsmen is that all their scrutiny of their terrain creates only a perceived reality, and one that removes them from what is real while simultaneously eliciting the possibility of a truer more authentic place that is unreachable. They are, in effect, in a solitary no-man’s land.

While at first glance Murnane’s treatment of his narrator and the characters in *The Plains*, ill-defined as they are, appears somewhat Romantic in that they are all isolated and yearning, formulating an individual view of the world – creatively,

⁴² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 79.

⁴³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 79.

⁴⁴ Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, p. 65–66.

idiosyncratically – it is at heart more postmodern than that. While postmodernism is difficult to define, it is often accepted as rejecting boundaries, accepting disorder, fragmentation and ambiguity and, above all, questioning the world and not accepting another's view as truth. Brian McHale deduces that a key strategy of postmodern fiction is to short-circuit any associations between stated locations in a text and their accepted attributes, a process he calls 'misattribution'.⁴⁵ The interior Australia of *The Plains* initially conjures familiar associations of blue skies and endless horizons; however, Murnane's visions of isolate fiefdoms in the outback 'displace and rupture these automatic associations'.⁴⁶ Gary Indiana, in his obituary of William Burroughs (1914–1997), credits Burroughs with writing the first postmodern texts (*Nova Express*, *The Soft Machine* et al.), works that 'embrace the fragmentary, the "incomplete," the deconstructive'.⁴⁷ The people of the plains celebrate the fragmented nature of existence; it is considered acceptable, rather than something to mourn as a Romantic would. Boundaries are most certainly blurred on the plains – the actual boundaries of properties are constantly shifting and debated. Describing an initial encounter with men of the plains, the narrator notes:

Most irritating of all to outsiders, he would affect to be without any distinguishing culture rather than allow his land and his ways to be judged part of some larger community of contagious tastes or fashions (p. 9).

Each individual of the plains has his or her own understanding of their place, each understanding is subjective and yet it is judged by all others as having merit based precisely on its subjectivity, on its inaccessibility to others.

⁴⁵ B McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Methuen, New York, USA, 1987, p. 47.

⁴⁶ McHale, p. 48.

⁴⁷ G Indiana, *Utopias Debris*, Basic Books, New York, USA, 2008, p. 70.

However, this is not a situation (or no-man's land) without some possible purpose as in effect the people of the plains in their accumulation of information about the known land, regardless of its subjectivity, are generating multiple 'virgin territories' on the horizon that Baudrillard asserts are missing in the modern world. By 'virgin territories' Baudrillard means places that harbour the imaginary, the unknown, places that prove the existence of the known and the real elsewhere. It is this 'virgin territory' that provides the known land with its realness. However, it is a process that is at once doing and undoing, as you cannot really know a thing or a place through a medium or texts alone. All of the conjectured, subjective information that the people of the plain generate in an effort to represent their understanding of the plains only obscures them.

Baudrillard quotes Marshall McLuhan's bumper sticker moment, 'the medium is the message'⁴⁸ (the medium dominates over meaningful content and 'only the medium can make an event whatever the contents'),⁴⁹ and asserts that just as reality in excess does away with reality, 'where we think information produces meaning, the opposite occurs. Information devours its own content'.⁵⁰ As mentioned previously, when everything is an event, when everything is being put forward as meaningful, 'rather than producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning'.⁵¹ *The Plains* is full of such voracious masses of information. At the heart of the narrative is a narrator who feels he has something to say. Or at least he feels that what he has to

⁴⁸ M McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Mentor, New York, NY, 1964.

⁴⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 82.

⁵⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 80.

In short Baudrillard suggests that the process of information devouring its own content occurs through the staging of meaning: the production of scenarios such as talkback radio and reality TV where 'phantom' content infiltrates real information, is participatory yet scripted and manipulated. The effect being that it is all empty entertainment but it feels important and essential. The proliferation of ways in which information is available does not equate to people being more informed. Wikipedia is a good example of an information source whose veracity is accepted and yet its content can be altered by anyone.

⁵¹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 80.

say is significant not only to him but to the landowners of the plains – that his peculiar perspective, his film, will be meaningful to a wide plains-born audience. Indeed, on the first page we are told that ‘the flat land around me seemed more and more a place that only I could interpret’ (p. 3). But as the narrative progresses, decades pass, and we are privy to the myriad pursuits of artisans and historians on the plains, ‘the irrelevance of such things as lenses and light waves to the creation of those images of mine that no one had yet laid eyes on’ (pp. 172–173) becomes apparent. The more the narrator strives to capture meaning, the meaning of the plains, through his research and amassing information, and to package that information, the more incomplete, the more diaphanous the meaning (the plains) becomes. Consumed by the processes that strive to inform it, a film of the plains can never take shape. The narrator even makes the unspoken admission that ‘my cabinets full of notes and preliminary drafts would probably never give rise to any image of any sort of plain’ (p. 170).

Indeed all the texts and mediums through which the people of the plains seek to know the plains display such seemingly necessary subjectivity that ‘no one is able to use them to alter his understanding of his own life’ (p. 110). The calibre of the information on the plains is of such a rarefied nature that it cancels itself out in the same way as Baudrillard’s ‘phantom content’ undermines information. Information here is millions of personal opinions – which is to say of no use to anyone else. There is no consensus as to what and where the plains are, the plainsfolk do not know where they are beyond the desire to know where. The plains that they all yearn for, the very same plains that the narrator hopes to capture on film, those plains of speculation, ‘that vision we’re all looking for’ (p. 63), ‘the Eternal Plains’ (p. 79), conjured into existence by all that information are destroyed in the same instant. The plains are analogous with the people of the plains. Their desire to know the plains is a desire to

know themselves; they look to the plains to decipher their existence. But despite all their scholarship the plains are unknowable, reflective even, turning the plainsfolk's gaze back upon themselves. Their interiority is driven by the unreachable destinations (the plains) that populate the horizon.

Murnane seems determined to investigate this gaze through his narrator – locked in a sort of busied paralysis surrounded by so much information about and interpretations of the one thing that holds everyone's attention – the plains.

Having spent at least twenty years (the book opens with this fact) on the plains, wrapped in its intricate parochial history and pastimes, the unwittingly obscurantist navel-gazing treatise on flora and fauna, at the end of the novel the narrator begins to relay talk of a darkness ahead. Darkness, it is suggested, is the only enduring element of the plains, of the plainsfolk; darkness that is often depicted as being inside the individual. After a day photographing a picnic (his 'scenes') out on the plains, the narrator's patron, an amateur photographer, insists 'nothing that we saw today exists apart from the darkness' (p. 157) and while people gaze upon his photographs 'the great tide of daylight was ebbing away from all that they looked at and pouring away through the holes in their faces into a profound darkness ...' (p. 154), and that the plains themselves are powerless against 'encroaching darkness' (p. 155), 'my same old private darkness' (p. 155). As if heralding the meaninglessness or the meaning of a life etched in the plains themselves, his patron, at one of many gatherings, poses the question:

The Great Darkness. Isn't that where all our plains lie? ... We're travelling somewhere in a world the shape of an eye. And we still haven't seen what other countries that eye looks out on (p. 158).

As noted in the introduction Murnane observes that this ultimate unreachable destination is also the ultimate deferred pleasure. It is the real world perhaps that is always beyond grasp, the idea that the people of plains ‘have behind them another visual but unseen world’,⁵² a true home. So perhaps Baudrillard is correct in suggesting that our true utopia or home that we long for and which is always unattainable is now actually the real world that has somehow evaporated.

On the plains the ‘unreachable’ and unknown lands, the plains of and beyond the horizon are only limited by the imagination of the plainsfolk themselves. Each is concerned with defining a plain particular to himself or herself – or a plain that is themselves. As the seventh landowner puts it ‘A man can know his place and yet never try to reach it’ (p. 75). A prospect that suggests reaching such a place would undo it. Imre Salusinszky writes that the plains ‘are process, not product; they are the question of Being, not an answer to it’⁵³ and their ‘exploration is a metaphor for a rigorous survey of internal states’.⁵⁴ It is the intangible element of the plains and the way Murnane ascribes an almost holy untouchableness to them that provokes an about-turn in the narrative. *The Plains* becomes an exploration of its characters as if they are themselves maps, as if all people are maps. This parallel is even sketched out by one of the landowners – ‘If I made maps of all your skins. I mean, of course, projections like Mercator’s. If I showed them all to you, would you recognise your own?’ (p. 63).⁵⁵

The function of the ‘unreachable’ in *The Plains* can be interpreted as being, as I have suggested, a means to reach ourselves – or a means for the characters and the

⁵² Murnane, quoted from an interview with Peter Mares on ABC Radio National The Book Show, 12 October 2009.

⁵³ Salusinszky, p. 46.

⁵⁴ Salusinszky, p. 47.

⁵⁵ A Mercator projection is a cylindrical map projection invented in 1569 by Flemish geographer and cartographer Gerardus Mercator.

people who inhabit the plains to interpret their existence. More broadly, Murnane's narrator observes:

... the plains are not what most plainsmen take them for. They are not, that is, a vast theatre that adds significance to the events enacted within them ... They are simply a convenient source of metaphors for those that know that men invent their own meanings (p. 141).

Salusinszky makes a similar observation of the plains in general in *The Plains* in that they afford the people of the plains the materials with which 'to find and describe a private landscape in its eccentricity and particularity'.⁵⁶ And while Salusinszky, Hansson and the narrator focus on the plains themselves as cerebral states for investigation, I believe it is the 'unreachable' aspect of the plains, that which lies beyond the horizon, the supposed, that looms equally large in the narrative as a device driving the narrative into multiple interiors – geographic and psychological. It is this characteristic of the plains that, more than any other, operates to turn the narrative inward. What the people of the plains focus on is not merely the physical plains which in reality would be traversable and definable but rather what they represent and how this is interpreted – an unattainable place, a distant blankness that can only be filled with the details of interiority.

Paradise

In the travelogue of *Paradise* the malaise of each postcard destination is palpable: decaying fish along the Niger, sewerage devouring crabs, and the detached tone of the narrator who reports amidst all of the frangipani, coral and blue blue water of Tahiti that 'time has stopped. It has got stuck in the neck of this lagoon ...' (p. 69) and in

⁵⁶ Salusinszky, p. 46.

Africa that ‘all the exoticism ... is already burnt to cinder, self-immolated’ (p. 120). The promised destinations of the novel’s title *Paradise* (or *Le Paradis* in the French in which it was written) are cancelled out at every turn. Baudrillard asserts that ‘Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real ... a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety ... that is carcereal’.⁵⁷ Conversely in *Paradise* paradise is defined as ‘a beauty whose artificiality we could not grasp’ (p. 74), a hyper-beauty that cannot be experienced, that solidifies and verifies the apparent *realness* of the narrator’s home.

Indeed the title *Paradise* becomes somewhat ironic given that the narrator refers to each new destination in such poor terms – they are all ‘nightmarish’ (p. 57), there is a list of misfortunes that ‘seemed to have been organised by malevolent powers’ (p. 78) causing badly sunburnt knees, underwear destroyed by the laundry service and as a final calamity the narrator gets struck by a falling coconut while trying to rest in a hammock. In Africa there is rebellion, ‘electricity cuts, water supplies stopped’ (p. 110). What perhaps promises to be idyllic is in reality hellish. In this first instance, the title, the idea that real and meaningful destinations are to be found in *Paradise* is undermined by the text. Paradise does not exist in *this* world as Jayne herself states ‘for me paradise could have been either China or hell itself ...’ (p. 36). There is no place in the narrative that delivers on the promise – the promised destination. Destinations seem false or are unbearable. Even small locales within in a larger map are somehow ominous and threatening – Martinique is ‘the world’s end’ (p. 1), the narrator’s bungalow there is ‘on the edge of some wasteland’ (p. 6), they travel to a ‘yawning chasm’ (p. 10) on

⁵⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 12.

a day trip and when cajoled into swimming the narrator describes the water as ‘one of those mini-abysses’ (p. 13).

Paradises no longer exist where they once did and it is perhaps the real the narrator now seeks, albeit in futility. There is no imaginary so one goes in search of the real; there is no real: everything becomes unreal. Trapped on a holiday of sorts, confronted with the death of his spouse, a mystery illness and the prospect of returning home the narrator concludes ‘I don’t know where to go. I don’t want to return to Zurich, nor do I have any desire to continue my journey’ (p. 21). The situation is made all the more unreal for the narrator as he learns that Jayne apparently did not exist and that he is perhaps ‘already dead’ (p. 21).

It is worth mentioning here that as Jean-Pierre Boulé points out in his full-length study of Guibert’s work *Hervé Guibert: Voices of the Self*, the manuscript of *Paradise* had a subtitle in brackets that translated as ‘mad novel’.⁵⁸ This was altered in the published version simply to ‘novel’ and omitted completely in translation. Despite this omission the madness Guibert signposted is certainly evident – paradise is mostly dull and unbearable, and more tellingly, ‘everything was beautiful, and false’ (p. 74). Indeed there is falseness and deceit both real and imagined. In Africa’s Bamako they order champagne only to find ‘a bottle of fake Moët-et-Chandon, made in Hong Kong’ (p. 72). Detained in Fort-de-France after Jayne’s death the narrator learns in a rather accusatory manner from a policeman that ‘Jayne Heinz does not exist ... Jayne Heinz never existed, either in the twentieth century or the nineteenth’ (p. 20). The non-existent Jayne who we are told is writing a thesis on ‘mad writers’ (p. 2) and listens to CDs on a Walkman is revealed after her death as having only listened to blank CDs (p. 22) and read books on Strindberg with uncut pages (p. 68).

⁵⁸ J-P Boulé, *Hervé Guibert: Voices of the Self*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, UK, 1999, p. 259.

Jayne whose companionship was ‘necessarily defective’ (p. 101). In Baudrillard’s terms these instance of false champagne and a person that does not apparently exist would be fitting props in a world where (as stated on page 74 of *Paradise*) the real is artificial to the point of being incomprehensible.

The example of what Baudrillard calls ‘deterrence machines’⁵⁹ seems to apply to the instances of imitation and falseness and the cheap tourist exoticism in *Paradise*. A ‘deterrence machine’ – the previously mentioned Disneyland is one – functions to ‘rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp’,⁶⁰ hence the picture perfect resorts, the fake luxury wine and non-existent companion bolster the idea that the narrator’s life in Zurich, his new flat that is being decorated in his absence is the real world. This is evident both for the reader and narrator as there are numerous allusions to the narrator having found ‘nothing’ on his travels. This falseness also renders the destinations themselves false – they are no longer the places they purport to be – Martinique is not Martinique, it is a network of resorts and infrastructure selling the idea of Martinique.

Boulé argues Jayne’s existence/non-existence as being evidence that the character of Jayne, and *Paradise* in its entirety, is homage to Guibert’s real Aunt Suzanne, the account of whose death returns the narrator to Zurich.⁶¹ While I have no reason to dispute this I would suggest that Jayne also functions as an imaginary or ‘false friend’ who further isolates the narrator in a narrative that is narcissistic but self-preserving. It might also be argued that Jayne is a ‘deterrence machine’ herself in that the lack of certainty as to her character and existence gives strength to the veracity of the narrator. Also the prospect of Jayne having never existed casts doubt

⁵⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 13.

⁶⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 13.

⁶¹ Boulé, p. 254.

over the whole landscape of the narrative both for the reader and the narrator, as he can no longer be sure that he did in fact travel to Africa and the French Pacific, which further strengthens the idea that all of *Paradise*'s locations are indeed unreachable.

All of the destinations visited in *Paradise* are unsatisfactory to the narrator, which in itself is satisfactory as it serves only to refocus the narrative on the narrator himself. The narrator is effusive in his description of Jayne and their lovemaking – but Jayne dies, or does not exist or possibly represents someone else – perhaps even Guibert himself.⁶²

Yet it is the imaginary Jayne that sets the pace of the novel as she is the one who 'always wanted to keep on rolling, because she didn't know how to park' (p. 11). It is Jayne who therefore could never really arrive anywhere due to this inability to set down. Prompting the narrator to 'wonder what it was that we were running away from or hunting for' (p. 10). To which she answers 'When you're in love, you must never stay in one place, immobility consumes love' (p. 10). From the perspective of the character of Jayne there is never any chance of arriving; all destinations are anathema to her – consuming at worst, inconvenient at best.

This turning away from the scenery, from the places of choice on the globe, and the unsatisfactory condition of each new place in *Paradise* aligns with Baudrillard's reflections on holiday destinations:

Holidays are in no sense an alternative to the congestion and bustle of cities and work. Quite the contrary. People look to escape into an intensification of the conditions of ordinary life, into a deliberate aggravation of those conditions: further from nature, nearer to artifice, to abstraction, to total pollution, to well above average levels of stress,

⁶² Boulé, p. 259.

The issue of who the narrator of *Paradise* is (Guibert or not) does not form part of this exegesis but is dealt with in detail by Boulé in the cited text in the introduction on page 9.

pressure, concentration and monotony – this is the ideal of popular entertainment. No one is interested in overcoming alienation; the point is to plunge into it to the point of ecstasy. That is what holidays are for.⁶³

Baudrillard suggests that there is no respite from the artificial and the polluting in paradise but rather overexposure to them. As Fritz, the pilot who relieves the narrator of the cash he speaks of not being able to get rid of, notes ‘they’ve [tourists] gulped down this whole so-called paradise, like an enormous hamburger slathered in ketchup’ (p. 25). What is perhaps mostly understood as definitions of ‘holiday’, ‘vacation’ or simply ‘escape’: rest, recuperation, an innocence or simplicity, are no longer represented in the brochure-fodder resorts and holiday spots of the globe. These promises are certainly absent in *Paradise*. In the passages describing the couple’s travel to and arrival in Tahiti the madness of foreign holidaying is revealed through the ‘jaded *vahines*’ (p. 58) who ‘practically clobbered you’ to hang flowers around their necks, and the ‘group of Catholic scouts’ (p. 59) who trample fellow passengers all the while singing ‘idiotic songs’ (p. 60). And here in Tahiti, the sense of falseness again creeps in with sand ‘so white and clean it must have been brought in by truck’ (p. 67).

In *Paradise* the non-existence of destinations forces the narrative from one locale to another in a confusion of travel, tracing and retracing and returns. The discovery that each new place is no longer authentic or reachable despite its proximity functions in much the same way as the far off lands beyond the horizon in *The Plains*. The beckoning promise of the terrain behind the horizon in *The Plains* boxes the narrative

⁶³ J Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*, 1980–1985, trans. Chris Turner, Verso, New York, USA, 1990, pp. 69–70.

in as do the disappointment, falseness and disposable imitation of the resorts in *Paradise*. Unlike *The Plains* though where this internalising of the narrative inhabits the people of the plains and the narrator with the unending examination of the plains, and each individual's particular plain, *Paradise* is much more obliterating. The destinations in *Paradise* are not the imaginary and dreamed of plains in a mythical Australia functioning as Baudrillard's proof of the existence of reality elsewhere; rather they are hollow representations of a rich landscape that once existed. The narrator, hopping from one location to another, traverses a wasteland of the 'real', a fake-land which, Baudrillard suggests, operates to disguise the fact that beyond its façade is only an absence of meaningful reality. These locations are not suggestive of reality existing elsewhere; they represent reality. The narrative of *Paradise* is therefore understandably dismissive of the destinations and all their danger, disappointment, falseness and deceit. It is not a narrative of discovery of, immersion in and engagement within a landscape and its characters but the extinction of them and even the extinction of the narrator. After Jayne's death the narrator encounters her doppelgänger, the thesis-writing anthropologist Diane whom he tells dismissively, after she explains her thesis, to 'shut up' (p. 35). Not discouraged, Diane propositions the narrator prompting "'No,' was all I could reply" (p. 39). There is no intrusion on the inward-focusing drive of narrative.

The manner in which each location is presented and sketched in the narrative fences in the narrator to examine his own mortality and frailty. He discovers he is surrounded by death, madness and amnesia – the death of Jayne, his father, his aunt; his own deteriorating mental state; the forgetting of an ambivalent world. The narrator notes that 'I had gone to Africa to find forgetfulness and to forget myself' (p. 97), and that Rimbaud taught him nothing of the place except that 'one goes there to destroy

oneself, to lose oneself, to wipe oneself off the map, to burn oneself, to be forgotten, to be bored with a mortal boredom' (p. 119) and that 'it does not exist' (p. 119). Even the prospect of returning to some semblance of a real life is destroyed as in Bamako, amidst rebellion, the narrator telegraphs the architect in charge of renovating his apartment saying 'Ruined – Stop – Stop all work ... I beg you' (p. 110). The one place the narrator feels must surely be immune to the falseness he encounters in the world is now under siege by 'architectural fantasies' (p. 110) and 'stairways that lead nowhere' (p. 110). The deconstruction and reconstruction of his apartment threaten to transform it from a safe place (or as Baudrillard asserts architecture should be, 'immanent and irrevocable'⁶⁴) into yet another disconnected signifier: no longer a home but a designed dwelling. Without the prospect of returning to a familiar sanctuary, the narrator, perhaps confirming Baudrillard's suspicion that the real world is now only to be found at the edges of the 'map' of civilisation, proposes 'I could end my days here' (p. 118) in Martinique just like the prostitute he encounters on the beach, 'a tourist lost at the world's end' (p. 118).

As we have seen in *The Plains* there is the generation of an 'imaginary', that is, the ultimate plains of and beyond the horizon. Murnane chooses to reassert this vast 'imaginary' in his re-imagined Australia, the corollary of which is a firm and affirming belief amongst the people of the plains that reality exists (albeit in fragmented and idiosyncratic forms). In contrast to the manifold subjectivities to which the unreachable, imaginary plains are subject, normal real life retains some ballast. The people of the plains are driven to introspection by the impassable, ever retreating boundary of the plains such is their proclivity to distrust a shared perspective. *Paradise* offers no such place. In *Paradise* everything is revealed – all

⁶⁴ F Proto, *Mass, Identity, Architecture: The Architectural Writings of Jean Baudrillard*, 2nd edition, John Wiley and Sons, London, UK, 2006, p. 71.

the destinations are unveiled as voids both culturally and geographically, loved ones die, lovers are not who they claim to be. There is no imaginary operating here; there is no 'normal' reality. Nothing can be reached and nothing is reserved or preserved. The narrative is that of one man living his own death – the tiny details and thoughts of one person examining his place.

Perhaps in *Paradise* the conclusion is one of exhausted resignation. One place, one destination is as good as any in a world where all destinations have expired, everything is cancelled out. 'On my return to Mali, I thought I understood that man is nothing and nobody. And I could just as well have said that he was everything' (p. 120).

Chapter II – TRUE HOMES

The term ‘true home’ implies a destination or place of authenticity, a personalised and real state or location that carries with it also the idea of completion or reconciliation. As mentioned in the introduction ‘true home’ has been used to define many destinations and most of them are tied to a reconciling element – to a spiritual completion or a returning to a whole state in the narratives of exile. It is the idea – that we are incomplete until we find our true homes – that is crucial.

Both *Paradise* and *The Plains* bear evidence of this longed-for location. And in both works the true home that could be equated in more theological times with a reunion with God in the afterlife or a returning to ancestral land after a forced absence takes on a more personal guise. So what are the possible true homes for the respective narrators of *The Plains* and *Paradise*?

The journeying in *Paradise*, taking in, no doubt not by accident, past and present conquests of French colonialism seems almost like a survey of all that is French or all that could be considered home to the French Guibert. The narrator, while noted as being Swiss in origin, is referred at least once in the text as ‘Guibert, Hervé’ (p. 104) who, at the time of writing *Paradise*, would go on to live only another six months⁶⁵ and while not considered by Boulé to be one of Guibert’s thanatographical works, the novel is nonetheless imbued with a sense of impending death and the prospect of knowing and finding one’s place in life at the end of it. There are the three key deaths that I have already mentioned – Jayne’s and those of both the narrator’s father and great aunt – and behind the text the inevitable death of the writer/narrator. We are confronted with a Frenchman for whom death is very much closing in. After the narrator’s collapse outside a church in Zurich a psychiatrist writes a letter of

⁶⁵ Guibert died on December 27 1991. *Le Paradis* was first published in 1992.

referral surmising that the Africa trip was a ‘continuation of suppressed grief for a great-aunt ... who donated her body and her home ... which apparently increased the sensation of dispossession’ (p. 104). It is as if with the death of the aunt the narrator is cut loose and for a time searches for ‘the passage of existence’ (p. 106) through ‘the vague unconsciousness of disaster’ (p. 115) only to conclude that ‘I’ve nothing more to do than slide toward amnesia’ (p.108). It is this dispossession that causes the narrator/author to have no real home, no point of reference from which to cast off and again safely return. His own real home is undergoing renovation and his familial links to places and people being cut. But death and possible afterlife are not privileged options for a final true home.

As noted earlier there is a shunning of ‘God’ in preference for the dark continent of Africa and all its terrible assaults. The narrator notes ‘They had wanted me to move toward God, but I did just as I pleased, and I preferred to leave for Africa’ (p. 106), an Africa to which according to Rimbaud one travels to ‘to destroy oneself, to lose oneself, to wipe oneself off the map, to burn oneself, to be forgotten ...’ (p. 119). The narrator moves toward a sort of nihilistic *joie de vivre* not unlike the ‘ecstasy’ conjured by Baudrillard in *Cool Memories*. Only it is precisely in this avoidance of the inevitable, of the accepting rituals associated with the process of death and dying, that the narrator perhaps finds a sense of reconciliation noting:

perhaps it was God I encountered in Africa in the stink of carp dying in the sun, along that river, the Niger, that could have been the Ganges, where at dawn, so as not to be seen, the lame, my brothers, went to wash themselves’ (p. 106).

But it is not God, rather the details that are operative here and more precisely the observing and writing of the details that offer some reconcile. That ‘seam’

between life and death, that is neither, and yet indistinguishable from both, is, for the narrator, a place from which to observe the dissolution of both and somehow transcend any death, any life.

If at the beginning of *Paradise* it is possible to differentiate narrator from author, at the end it is impossible. Guibert's true home, that place one longs for but perhaps never reaches, can only be approached through the process of writing, through language, his voice. Indeed he goes so far as to say 'When I am no longer writing I feel I'm dying' (p. 111). We have already seen how, for the narrator, there is little respite in the so-called paradises of the world and none in the afterlife either, given his stance on deities. So we are left with the writing – that is 'madness: both madness and reason' (p. 104). While this research does not focus on metaphysics and language, the idea of the voice being a true home perhaps has its origins with Giorgio Agamben's reflection on language, as Catherine Mills and Paolo Bartoloni point out respectively 'it is only in existing "in language without being called there by any Voice" and dying "without being called by death" ... that humanity can return to its proper dwelling place'⁶⁶ and 'The voice, as opposed to pure language, is not outside language but firmly ensconced in language, and its actuality is, according to Agamben, the true home of humanity'.⁶⁷

The exasperation at both the paradises of the world and the machinations and frailty of family somehow make sense in light of the idea that for the narrator/writer writing is the closest approximation of a true home. All of it is a soap opera of sorts,

⁶⁶ C Mills, 'Giorgio Agamben (1942–)', Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005, viewed 25 November 2009, <www.iep.utm.edu/agamben>.

Mills is quoted here quoting from:

G Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E Pinkus and Michael Hardt, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, USA, p. 96, 1991.

⁶⁷ P Bartoloni, 'Benjamin, Agamben, and the Paradox of Translation' in *CLCWEB: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.2, Purdue University Press, 2004, viewed 25 November 2009, <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss2/5>>.

material that keeps him at his task, to the end, and as close to a true home as he can get.

The Plains appears to come to a similar conclusion as to where a true home lies for its narrator. If the true home of the narrator of *Paradise* is the voice of the narrator or his ability to have a voice and to write his voice, the true home for the narrator of *The Plains* is similarly close at hand and personal. As we have seen Salusinszky notes that Murnane in all his books has pursued the theme of exile', yet *The Plains* is set firmly in an Australian context, a stylised and 'other' Australia but the place is definite nonetheless. So there is no literal exile for either the Australian narrator or the Australian Murnane. Rather the exile is one of isolation from everything. Salusinszky calls this solipsism, 'the letting go of the faith or belief that we can share a world with other minds'.⁶⁸ It is one of the marked themes of *The Plains* that the people of the plains must come to their own idiosyncratic understanding of the land around them. Indeed, any understanding other than a personal one is seemingly meaningless. After ten years on the plains the narrator, in considering literature of the plains concludes:

One of the chief attractions of these remarkable conjectures is that no one is able to use them to alter his understanding of his own life

...

How might a man reorder his conduct if he could be assured that the worth of a perception, a memory, a supposition, was enhanced rather than diminished by its being inexplicable to others? And what could a man not accomplish, freed from any obligation to search for so-called truths apart from those demonstrated by his search for a truth peculiar to him? (pp. 110–111)

⁶⁸ Salusinszky, pp. 56–57.

Salusinszky also makes the observation of the Australian settlers in Paraguay in the story ‘The Battle of Acosta Nu’ in *Landscape with Landscape* (the Murnane work he discusses with *The Plains* in the chapter ‘A Private Place’) that the true home, ‘the place that is supposed to offer a refuge from textuality is known exclusively through texts’.⁶⁹ This is equally applicable to the man of the plains, searching for his true home somewhere out in the vast interior through the creation and consultation of infinite textual interpretations – manuscripts, books, poetry, painting, histories, films etc. or as Salusinszky puts it ‘exile in interpretation’.⁷⁰ It becomes obvious that while the narrative turns again and again to yearning for lands both beyond and unreachable, the real terrain he seeks whether consciously or unconsciously is psychological. Hansson argues that the settings in all Murnane’s works ‘are to be understood as mental precincts, as states of mind’.⁷¹ and the narrator of *The Plains* certainly comes to embody this idea in that over time he becomes as removed from the plains as all who dwell there. Removed and yet, as is often stated in the text, supposedly closer to a truer place, the narrator suspects ‘that every man may be travelling toward the heart of some remote private plain’ (p. 83) and that he himself ‘was disappearing into some invisible private world’ (p. 92).

As the third landowner noted, exploring is a private business, not something that should be hampered by thoughts of return or acquittal. It is almost as if what is being suggested here is that the journey, the search, the exploration of actual geography spurred on by some belief in an idealised state of reconciliation is the only true home on offer. You cannot know or find your true home through texts, you

⁶⁹ Salusinszky, p. 67.

⁷⁰ Salusinszky, p. 54.

⁷¹ Hansson, p. 16.

cannot know or find it in the actual landscape and yet there is always this profound knowledge that it is there.

Salusinszky says of *The Plains* that ‘the ending of exile had become complicated by an additional difficulty: not that the true place is too far beyond the searcher, but that the searcher has receded too far back within himself’.⁷² And at the end of *The Plains* this is what the narrator seems ready to commit to film when he takes up his camera and reverses it so that the lens is pressed to his eye ‘as if to expose to the film in its dark chamber the darkness that was the only visible sign of whatever I saw beyond myself’ (p. 174). In the final act of executing some part of his plan for a film, the narrator is poised to record the darkness within himself, the darkness on the screen at the back of his eye. Effectively the film that was supposed to reveal what is essential about the plains becomes a film about what is essential about a man. The private is privileged.

So beyond the self there is only a darkness – whatever sense is to be made of this world is to be found inside oneself. The true home is always with us perhaps but is unrecognisable or it is the end to the ‘solipsism’ that Salusinszky suggests, a reuniting with others in a shared existence and understanding.

⁷² Salusinszky, p. 42.

Chapter III – BECOMING THE UNREACHABLE

The Fourth Place

The ideas of the unreachable or ‘unreachable destinations’ and ‘true homes’ permeate my creative project, a novel *The Fourth Place*, through the construction and exploration of alienating ‘non-places’⁷³ – places that for whatever reason are ill-defined: planes and airports; roads; vacant houses; an empty, yet viable, town. Places that while open to occupation are unknowable or as yet incomplete. The ‘non-place’ as defined by Marc Augé is an extension of or adjunct to Baudrillard’s examination of the shopping centre or hypermarket in ‘Hypermarket and Hypercommodity’ in which he notes the hypermarket ‘is the expression of a whole lifestyle in which not only the country but the town as well have disappeared’.⁷⁴ Augé’s hypothesis is that non-places (the examples he gives include airports, highways, supermarkets) are the opposite of anthropological places or:

spaces in which inscriptions of the social bond (for example, places where strict rules of residence are imposed on everyone) or collective history (for example, places of worship) can be seen.⁷⁵

They are places of transients that are to be passed through, in which everyone is together perhaps but isolated at the same time.

My novel, a third-person, past-tense episodic narrative with some magical realist and modernist overtones is ostensibly the story of two men, Mark and Abelard, who find themselves lost in a town in the middle of the Australian desert with no way of leaving. It is a town that has everything to sustain them apart from any form of

⁷³ M Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, trans. John Howe, Verso, London and New York, 1995.

Augé defines a non-place as ‘a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity’ (pp.77–78).

⁷⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 77.

⁷⁵ Augé, p. viii.

communication with the outside world and any other inhabitants. Interspersed with their story are the stories of other characters they are together or individually connected to and stories related to their pasts.

Abelard Jones an American, one-armed astronaut, crash lands outside the town after orbiting the Earth with no real mission and persistent hallucinatory episodes regarding his amputated arm. Mailroom worker Mark Trace simply wakes up in the desert outside the town with no real indication of why or how he has disappeared from one life to take up residence in another. Together they are in and begin to explore the non-place that is the town, and dream of escape. The town is marked as a non-place, I believe, as while it does contain all that is necessary to sustain life on a physical level ‘it does not contain any organic society’.⁷⁶ And while the town is not concerned primarily with any of Augé’s three signifiers of a non-place ‘circulation, consumption and communication’,⁷⁷ ‘the possibility of non-place is never absent from any place’.⁷⁸

Other characters – Laura Sable-Mouvant, Iona, Here Now and T-T – while all in some way connected to Mark, Abelard or the town, explore their own glimpsed non-places.

Through the character-driven episodes that make up the work, connections are made between the individuals but are not necessarily played out. Crossed paths are alluded to but actual connection is beyond these characters to some degree, connection is something that perhaps occurred in the past, or at the very least off page. Each is isolated in a particular non-destination, often both physically and psychologically, which lends the narrative deliberate introspection.

⁷⁶ Augé, p. 90.

⁷⁷ Augé, p. ix.

⁷⁸ Augé, p. 86.

In this exegesis I have argued that unreachable destinations, sites that are either imaginary or no longer authentic, serve to turn the narrative away from the world external to the characters toward an exploration of the inner world of the characters, an interiority.

In *The Plains* the horizon as a plain is the reflective force that inspires all inhabitants of the plains to examine their own lives, their own place within the landscape. They cannot reach or recover these dreamed of vistas, these imaginary terrains, and so the inaccessible landscape becomes a source of metaphor with which to understand life. The narrator reflects on the varied ways in which each individual of the plains might come to know the plains and by extension themselves. All while he is becoming another such person – irradiated by the intense possibility that a plain where real life is taking place might be just around the corner. All understandings on the plains are private ones, all journeys motionless.

In *Paradise* a survey of sites on the ‘dark continent’ and in the south pacific finds them missing and false, ‘leaving no memory of anything’ (p. 102). Here the locations become not even a backdrop to the narrative, which instead charts the devolution of the narrator’s relationship and his mind – forcing a starkly honest exploration of the conscious and unconscious grappling with what it means to be alive.

In *The Fourth Place* the unreachable destinations conjured by the characters derail what are essentially meaningless journeys to begin with, but they find any resultant introspection equally without solace. Instead of a self-discovery being enacted in the absence of any meaningful external terrain to map, they desperately seek to piece together lost connections with other individuals.

Mark's 'clear space' that is described as a rather Murnane-like 'field of grass that had no discernible beginning or end', a place where 'you might walk for a year in any direction and at the end of that journey be exactly in the same place from which you set out' is an imaginary site that, while comforting to Mark, is a happiness constructed around a singularity where there is no one there except him.

Lone astronaut Abelard's reason for wanting to go into space is stated as being 'that it seemed like a pity not to reach out into that endless distance ... To get a bit further way from the beginning'; however, once in space he is plagued by the question of his own worth, and the overwhelming idea that something is missing. He is full of nihilistic bravura but craves the reassurance of another.

In *The Fourth Place* the themes of unreachable destinations and true homes become somewhat conflated. And in turn metaphors for a desire to belong and to be connected to others. On this level the narrative explores the ways in which people are connected and how this is overlooked or unrecognised. Abelard was once in a relationship with Laura, Laura is now in a relationship with Mark, Laura shares a plane trip with T-T who once abandoned her daughter Here Now, Iona finds a skirt in an empty house that eventually finds its way into Here Now's possession, Here Now was once in the town where Mark and Abelard find themselves. None of these connections is particularly explicit because recognising a sense of belonging or a true home is tenuous, perhaps even unreachable.

Having researched 'small world theory',⁷⁹ I became interested not so much in whom we are connected to but how we are connected to others and how this adds to a sense of belonging. It seemed irrelevant to me that, in theory, a single parent living in

⁷⁹ The small world experiments were conducted by psychologist Stanley Milgram at Harvard University in 1967 and sought to measure the length, measured in individuals, of social networks. It is often associated with and understood by the phrase 'six degrees of separation'.

country Victoria could be connected via six other people to, say, the Prime Minister of Australia. What seemed more significant was the cadence of any connection between one person and the next – the connection between siblings and friends for instance more often resonates than the connection between work colleagues.

In *The Fourth Place* this idea is explored through the aforementioned connections between the characters. These connections are relative near misses, they exist but are neither robust enough nor of the right order to impact on the characters. None of the characters ever ‘reaches’ the other in a way that is significant. There are relationships at play in the narrative but they are distant and smooth while masquerading as otherwise acceptable. In a sense the characters themselves become destinations, equally as unattainable as their geographic counterparts.

All of the characters in *The Fourth Place* are searching for a sense of belonging in a modern world that is at once ultra-connected (social networking etc.) yet somewhat devoid of belonging and connection. It is not necessarily a narrative in which characters find ways to interpret meaning in relationships with people and places; however, it seeks to make the most of the minor threads that might exist between people, the sub-atomic traces of enmeshment, of arrivals, of homes, of belonging.

Yet belonging is a state of flux, always threatening to unravel. In a world where belonging is increasingly tied to exposure to media and social media ‘whoever is underexposed to the media is desocialized’.⁸⁰ The social of today could be the asocial of tomorrow, so belonging as a destination is forever redefining itself, always newly formed and out of reach.

⁸⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 80.

CONCLUSIONS

Before I began this research I was interested in ideas about being lost and being found and the possibility that these two seemingly opposed positions were largely the same or at least interchangeable. What I think I was really wanting to explore were themes of exile such as the ‘true home’ and the yearning and longing for some place that for whatever reason can no longer be found or reconciled with. The connection being that in ‘being lost’ in a terrestrial world that is largely ‘known’ and ‘safe’ would somehow be akin to the reconciliation or the ‘being found’ of a true home that is represented by unreachable destinations or places. The idea of an unreachable destination then has become a positive site rather than a negative one.

In part, what the modern world is beginning to lack is the space that allows the possibility of being lost, the possibility of a vast unknown. While there are still parts of the world that are uninhabited or overlooked due to inhospitable climate or terrain, such as the Nullarbor, their mystery is diminished precisely by such categorising as ‘arid’ and ‘uninhabited’. Still it is possible that, despite their apparent lack of anything of interest, such areas still ignite a sense of the imaginary – ‘Useless, barren, dry, treeless and waterless yet, the Nullarbor opens up a vision of sunlit plains that often beckons me’.⁸¹ However, Baudrillard would have it that ‘Until now we have always had the reserve of the imaginary – now the coefficient of reality is proportional to the reserve of the imaginary that gives it its specific weight. This is also true of geographic and spatial exploration: when there is no longer any virgin territory, and thus one available to the imaginary, *‘when the map covers the whole territory,*

⁸¹ H Smith, ‘The Nullarbor Track: Desert Rhapsody’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 28 1940, viewed 20 April 2010, <<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1301&dat=19400628&id=ZE4RAAAIABAJ&sjid=5pQDA AAAIABAJ&pg=4617,3527135>>.

something like the principle of reality disappears'.⁸² The 'imaginary' Baudrillard speaks of, the unreachable destinations of this thesis, is somehow crucial to the construction of personal narratives aligned with exile and finding one's place in the world and its ever increasing loss in the real world requires new strategies.

In *The Plains* what Murnane achieves is a re-imagining of an Australia, a devising of precisely an imaginary place that is at once familiar and foreign. In such a place the 'imaginary' is once again functioning at the opposite end of reality allowing the narrator and characters to invent their personal journeys toward and into 'that land we all dream of exploring' (p. 66). The entire novel could be viewed as an imaginary reserve if you like, an engine generating what is lacking in the real world.

While potentially bleak in its view of the plainsmen and the narrator, *The Plains* at least has an over-abundance of this 'imaginary'; its landscape offers nothing if not the possibility of a truer place just over the horizon. Of course as we have seen the actual ultimate plains are wholly unreachable but again this is beside the point. Their elusive nature is what provides the sense of one true place. It is somewhat of a paradox. The plains provide the space to yearn for a truer place – one that they represent – but are unreachable. And so, as we have seen, the focus of this desire, this searching and yearning turns inward, prompting a survey of the personal psychological terrain that exists within the individual. The plains 'is inhabited by people privileged to search for its particularity (that quality which obsesses plainsmen as the idea of God or of infinity has obsessed other peoples) as readily as the man of the present might try to divine the special identity of his own place' (p. 115). The search for the particularity then becomes the true home, and the unreachable destinations that surround the narrator of *The Plains* as they do all plainsmen provide

⁸² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 123.

the necessary foil upon which they all cast their imaginations in the hope of illuminating the darkness inside themselves. There is, however, as Salusinszky notes, still the problem of the plainsmen being to far removed in their personal interiorities from all other inhabitants of the plains to ever really feel reconciled with anything but themselves. In their search for their own particularities then the people of the plains construct and deconstruct realities freely; nothing is corroborated as real despite the fact that they are all imagining the same thing – the plains. The imaginary of the plains that would otherwise function to prove the existence of a shared reality elsewhere therefore dilutes reality, fragments it through the process of ‘subjectification’ – the ‘single imaginative mission’⁸³ of the people of the plains. The result being that for the people of the plains it is the real that they long for most.

In contrast *Paradise* is burdened by a lack of the imaginary in that it is set quite firmly in the real and recognisable world. All of the destinations here we know by name and description, precisely as they are no longer virgin and have succumbed to the ‘conquest of space’.⁸⁴ Here the imaginary is lost because geography is finite and disposable. In a sense what can perhaps be inferred from Baudrillard is that destinations are somewhat ‘single-use’ in their function as reserves of the imaginary. The collusion between ‘the real’ and ‘the imaginary’ to offer a place to long for is somewhat turned about. In a world, our world, where there is no longer any unknown, nowhere for the imaginary to lurk or work, ‘it is the real that has become our true utopia—but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object’,⁸⁵ indeed Guibert’s narrator notes of Africa ‘It was better to dream of Africa than to set foot on it’ (p. 120). In writing

⁸³ Salusinszky, p. 46.

⁸⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 123.

⁸⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 123.

Paradise Guibert faces the lack of the unknown or imaginary reverberating out through the Pacific waters from all the locales he visits to devastate Baudrillard's 'real'.

Hence the geography of the chosen destinations for the endless jetsetting of the narrator and his companion, Jayne, are completely arbitrary as they are all equally representative of places that no longer exist. One destination is as good as any other:

Jayne only had to say Bora Bora and there we were. She could have said: the Bahamas, Honolulu or Key West and we would have found ourselves in the Bahamas, Honolulu or Key West, one or other of those nightmarish dream resorts (pp. 56–57).

As 'terrestrial space today is virtually coded, mapped, registered, saturated [and], has thus in a sense closed up',⁸⁶ the horizon in *Paradise* is blank, the only terrain to scrutinise is mental.

If Murnane's *The Plains*, with its somewhat more fertile ground for the imaginary, makes an existential fist of dealing with unreachable desires, placing some emphasis within the narrative on the particular and, more importantly, private view of the individual, the fiction of Guibert's *Paradise* seeks to expose the internalised realm of the narrator/writer. Both books reveal interior journeys for their respective narrators that are brought into relief by the fences of unreachable destinations, unreachable because they no longer exist or are simply imaginary and cerebral. Despite the apparent flatness of Murnane's plains they tower at the edges of his narrative's landscape, perfectly unreachable and unknowable to his narrator and reminding him that he is a long way yet from himself. Guibert's solution to finding meaning in the world/world of his books comes through the writing of them. It is

⁸⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 123.

difficult to separate the author from the narrator in *Paradise* and the result is a work that in response to the despairing at a loss of a meaningful world is at once a desperate race to write until the end, which is to say live until the end and it is a haunting journey that becomes an unlikely home.

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